

Through Foreign Eyes: Artist Commentary

History and Background

Civita Castellana played a special role in the history of landscape and ultimately modern painting. Graced with a stunning landscape and a fortuitous location on the Via Flaminia, Civita hosted generations of international artists in the 18th and 19th centuries destined for Rome, then the artistic center of the western world. The legacies of classical antiquity, the Renaissance, and for landscape painters, the Baroque tradition of classical landscape in the work of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, drew artists to the Eternal City. A standard artist practice at the time was to study from nature in the open air. Driven by the Enlightenment spirit to observe and understand nature in order to reproduce it in the studio, artists took to the countryside around Rome, the “Campagna Romana” in unprecedented numbers. The singular qualities of the local landscape made Civita Castellana a preferred destination for this purpose. The monumental tufa cliffs and narrow water courses flowing through valleys strewn with ancient ruins, corresponded closely to the classical vision of ideal beauty, the “Beau Ideal”, which painters sought to create in studio compositions. In Civita Castellana the grand forms associated with artistic imagination were real and easily accessible by foot. Of the multitudes of painters that drew inspiration from the Civita landscape and environs, a few pivotal characters can be singled out for their influence: Lorrain, Valenciennes, Turner and most famously, Corot.



PH Valenciennes *Landscape of Ancient Greece* 1786(Detroit Institute of Arts)

Curious about the itineraries of the tradition and eager to paint here ourselves, we first came to Civita Castellana in 1999 guided by nothing more than reproductions of paintings and drawings made at least 180 years before. Images of Mount Soracte looming across an open landscape, fortresses and churches

perched on cliffs, bridges and deep ravines with streams flowing through mysterious forests, all so unlike anything we had seen in other parts of Italy, fueled our enthusiasm to see these places today. We vividly recall our first disappointing impressions after exiting the autostrada and approaching the town through the industrial zone as we passed one anonymous, ugly modern building after another. It seemed that everywhere we looked the landscape had been so dramatically altered by development that it would be impossible to be inspired by those iconic subjects that captivated previous generations of artists. When it became clear that we needed more than images of 19th century art work to locate ourselves, we parked in the town center and proceeded to the tourist office which, by chance, was open. There we were met by a staff of two locals, enthusiastic to share their knowledge about the area with us. Within minutes our ears were full of tales of the previously unknown Faliscan people, their fate at the hands of the Romans, ancient roads, cemeteries and trekking routes, a Byzantine corridor, a tradition of ceramic production and more. We realized that there was much more to Civita Castellana than the painting tradition that flourished here and that it would take real effort to appreciate this. We asked for the names of some local accommodations and vowed to return to spend time discovering the area which we did the following year.

What began as a casual visit has evolved into an active artistic engagement with Civita Castellana and its surroundings. Thanks to persistent curiosity, creative interpretation and the generous help of key local landowners (1), we were eventually able to use reproductions of historic works to decode the transformed landscape and discover its beauty. It was a slow undertaking requiring multiple trips during which our network of local relationships continued to expand along with our interest in the territory. In 2001 we introduced our first group of Americans to Civita Castellana to paint its historic motifs. This initiative was far more challenging than organizing artists near our home in Tuscany because the landscape was so much more developed. Our first requirement for bringing painters to any location is that it be beautiful, unspoiled and offer an artist the possibility of an experience of nature in isolation. Today the only way to accomplish this in Civita is to travel from place to place between zones of intense urbanization. It is logistically demanding and impossible without the willingness of private individuals to provide access to their properties. Yet, it was worth the effort. In the solitude of painting artists easily developed a connection with the local landscape. By facilitating access, they could see what we

saw and, despite the modern development, found the natural beauty inspiring and worthy of attention.

The Exhibition

In the decade since that first group excursion we have continued to bring painters, students as well as colleagues, to Civita Castellana, and many have returned more than once. Without exception these artists have been foreigners with no previous knowledge of the town except for a vague understanding of a tradition of open-air painting that once thrived here. They have universally expressed enthusiasm for the territory but it is tempered by concern for the fragility of the natural beauty and a sense of potential loss. "Through Foreign Eyes" presents an exhibition of paintings executed exclusively on location in Civita Castellana. The condition of working "sur la motif" insured that the artist had an authentic experience of the local landscape and not one mediated by a photograph. We believe that genuine appreciation is not possible without direct experience and it was essential that the artists had exposure to the total environment and not just a piece of it. In choosing the works for the show we were guided by some fundamental organizing principles. First and foremost we wanted to emphasize the natural beauty that is STILL a feature of the territory although it is threatened by neglect and uninspired development that lacks a unified vision. We present natural subjects that were the traditional stock of motifs depicted by artists in Civita Castellana: tufa cliffs, Mount Soracte, the Tiber Valley, the local vegetation, etc.



JBC Corot *Civita Castellana 1826-27* (Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle)

Next we focused on architectural monuments that provide a testimony to a time when nature and culture were more harmoniously integrated. The Sangallo Fortress and Clementino Bridge for example, were designed with a consideration of the natural aesthetic of the site in mind. Both were constructed from local tufa

and blend perfectly with the surroundings. We offer these structures as a direct contrast to contemporary building that seems to be driven by basic functionality and financial consideration alone, without regard for visual impact and completely disconnected from the larger environment. Finally, and not least importantly, we wanted to open a discussion about historic memory and why it is important. This complex issue is relevant on multiple levels and defining local identity is only one. In this context we consider the Valley of Celle with Vignale, Faleri Novi, and Civita Castellana's agrarian past.



Samuel J Ainsley *Civita Castellana from Vignale 1843* (British Museum)

The Eyes of the Foreign Artist

Foreigners as outsiders have different experiences of places than local inhabitants and consequently see things differently. What can a foreigner see that a local does not? Lacking knowledge and familiarity with a place a foreigner is able to see it as an objective totality. A local sees a place over time, as an accumulation of daily experiences and it is more difficult to grasp the whole as he or she dwells within it. When the landscape is transformed it occurs gradually, like aging, the changes not so evident from one day, week, or month to the next but at some point it is all different: unrecognizable and irretrievably lost. It is less easy for a local to notice this process. The unprejudiced vision of the foreigner offers a fresh perspective by virtue of its independence from local interests and, for the same reason, can be more honest. The foreigner who comes from another country has a vision informed by a completely different cultural position that sees alternatives that locals may not.

Artists are people that notice things and bring them to public attention. Open-air painters accustomed to looking at nature for long periods of time, notice changes in the landscape even more.

Artists Then, Artists Now

Great achievements and traditions of the past have always presented themselves to living artists for comparison and inspiration. Poussin and Claude



Claude Lorraine Tiber with Mount Soracte 1640's (Louvre)

sought out the world of antiquity and the Roman poets while following the prescriptions of Leonardo da Vinci to study directly from nature. Later Corot, Turner and their contemporaries made their pilgrimages to Rome conscious of their debt to Poussin and Claude. We in turn were drawn to Civita Castellana to connect with the open-air tradition of Valenciennes and Corot. The real value of this exercise lay not in painting the landscape and vainly trying to see and be inspired by what previous artists saw. Rather it was in the contrast with the past itself that we became more aware of what makes our world distinct and helped clarify our creative intentions.

There are major differences between the reality that the Neo-classical and Romantic painters experienced in Civita Castellana and the reality today. The artists of the past came to the area to view and study the "heroic" forms of nature that they could easily do in an unspoiled landscape. Populations were low, buildings were few, Nature was dominant. A short walk from a hotel brought an artist directly into it. It did not require a great imagination to idealize nature and re-arrange it according the stylistic conventions of the time. In contrast today, an artist has to make an effort to get out into the landscape and it is not a simple matter. The shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy and the accompanying growth, have transformed the landscape. The places that were once favorite spots for artists have either been developed, not necessarily with aesthetic considerations in mind, and even polluted; or abandoned and overgrown. Today, the only way to have an intimate contact with nature and enjoy unspoiled views is to do so from private properties. This presents the obstacle of meeting the owners and requesting

access, obtaining keys and remote controls, driving, specifying precise times for entering and leaving, etc. Nature and culture have separated. Our relationship with nature is no longer natural.

As landscape painters we perceive this disconnection from nature as a loss. The most obvious loss is aesthetic. Beautiful views with buildings in harmonious accord have disappeared, replaced by some form of development, often visually jarring and unconnected to the landscape. Separation from nature also implies a lack of appreciation of the interdependence of man and nature and the risks that accompany this. The growing threat of global warming is an extreme case of the consequences of disregarding this relationship. More deeply is the loss to the basic human experience that accompanies our disconnection from nature. The changing cycles of nature: birth, growth, death, renewal provide us with one of the best examples of continuity in life. It can help us feel balanced and stable, reassured in the face of change and ultimate mortality. None of these things were issues for our artist predecessors. They are problems unique to our time.



Artist Jessica Pinsky paints Mount Soracte

In the past there was a greater concern with observation. When the dominant mode of pictorial expression was representation artistic training depended on it. For non-artists a complete education involved the study of life drawing, the objective of which was to sensitize the individual to the visible world. The act of looking and appreciating the visual was more developed. In contrast, today there are a variety of modes of pictorial expression and greater emphasis on non-representation. There has been a corresponding decrease in the importance of observation in artistic training. Often students encouraged to interpret what they see, if they are trained from life at all, never learn to really look at anything. No one would expect a non-artist to study drawing as it would not seem to serve any practical purpose in an increasingly specialized world. One of the results of this

change is that most people do not notice what is going on in the world around them. The visual impoverishment of the landscape steadily increases and our eyes are blind to it. In this context, painting from observation can be seen as a political act for bringing attention to the beauty at risk by a general failure to SEE. The sustained, attentive gaze of the painter in the landscape bears witness to the natural riches that are still there. From this perspective looking becomes a means of valuing.

Landscape as a Cultural Value

While the works included in this exhibition are predominantly the subjects depicted by past generations of artists it would be a mistake to conclude that ours is an act of nostalgia and anachronism. Rather, we mean to suggest that the landscape of Civita Castellana has acquired a cultural value through a long, continuous tradition of artistic interpretation. As such it deserves to be valued as cultural patrimony.

The relationship between the landscape and the preservation of local historic memory seems to be acknowledged but not always appreciated. What is less obvious is that historic memory is not an exclusively local phenomenon. In serving as a forum for study and experimentation by artists through the centuries, the landscape of Civita Castellana achieved international iconic status. It has therefore become part of the historic memory of painting with a resonance far beyond the town itself. Hence its preservation is not simply a local concern.

Final Observations

We have come to love Civita Castellana and it seems that more and more, other artists are sharing this sentiment. There is even talk of “re-birth” in the air. Since artists tend to recognize value before others this can be a good sign of things to come. Certain issues can be addressed however that will provide that a growth in attention to Civita from outsiders is not limited to artists.

Some of the most compelling places to explore and take a hike in the area are abandoned, overgrown and inaccessible. The Valley of Celle is the most obvious example. Each year it becomes more difficult to enter and the once charming ancient bridge across the river ever more subject to collapse. The valley itself contains the essence of the Faliscan culture and its idyllic coexistence with nature. It was a strollers’ and sketchers’ paradise during the age of the Grand Tour.



JW Mechau Ancient Bridge at Civita Castellana 1795 (collection Joe Vinson)

The visitor today is denied an experience of this and most are completely unaware of its existence. Archeological trek paths and forest floors along rivers that artists in Corot’s time found so compelling are hardly so when polluted water flows through them. While there is no shortage of activities for visitors there does seem to be a lack of accommodations and services in the town center which is the most logical place to stay during a sojourn here.

Civita Castellana offers the foreigner today something that is less and less common in Italy: an experience of a genuine Italian town. Mass tourism has transformed many places into living museums populated by jaded locals who seem more irritated by than favorably disposed toward the visitor ultimately leaving one with a bad impression. In contrast, the artists in this exhibition have unanimously expressed enthusiasm for the “real” quality of the life here. We may have guided their eyes in bringing them to various locations here but their experiences are their own. There is no question that foreigners find Civita Castellana and her rich past interesting and worthy of further exploration.

A future of opportunity awaits those here willing to see with foreign eyes.

Maddine Insalaco and Joe Vinson

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We continue to feel the loss of **Giuseppina Flamini** who was the first person to encourage our initiatives in the area. She would have enthusiastically supported this exhibition and we are sorry that she is not here to see it. It is impossible to be here and not miss her presence.

Also no longer with us, but fondly remembered nevertheless

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